

Reflections on Philosophy in Catalonia

Josep Ferrater Mora

After nearly a year in the planning, Victòria Camps confirmed in a letter to Josep Maria Ferrater Mora on 23 April 1979 that the Spanish Ministry of Education had decided to award him an honorary doctorate from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). On 21 November of that year, he received the degree in an investiture ceremony at which he gave an acceptance address that was later to become famous. Because the university did not yet have an auditorium for such events in the building that housed the rector's office, the ceremony was held at the UAB's University School of Business Studies in Sabadell. Indeed, the location also made sense because the second individual to be honoured that day was Pau Vila, a native son of Sabadell. The auditorium was full to overflowing. Ferrater expressed his delight at the honour and read a text that in reality reprised the subject that he had addressed from Santiago de Chile thirty-five years earlier in his volume *Les formes de la vida catalana* [*Catalan Ways of Life*] (1944). Now he set out his ideas of *seny*, *mesura* and *ironia* (in English, good sense, measure and irony), adding faithfulness to reality, a penchant for contracts, professionalism and the desire for clarity. Between these two texts, he had moved through logic and analytic philosophy in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, and this experience added nuance to his original arguments.

His reprisal of the subject fit well with the spirit of the times, which had not yet been dubbed the Transition in Spain. Rather, it involved the retrieval, renovation and reconnection of everything that had been lost in the tradition of philosophy forced abroad. The address generated expectation and also, before and afterwards, ambivalent feelings on the subject matter. Below we reproduce extracts from this acceptance address, with special attention given to the passages that deal with the question as they appeared in the university publication: *Pau Vila i Dinarès, Josep Ferrater i Mora (honorary doctorates): speeches delivered at the investiture ceremony, held at Sabadell on 21 November 1979 at the University School of Business Studies*.

[Pompeu Casanovas]

Reflections on Philosophy in Catalonia (1979) Josep Ferrater Mora

I say “philosophy in Catalonia” and not “Catalan philosophy” because my philosophical predilections lean toward the idea that philosophy – like science – has no nationality. Speaking of “a Catalan philosophy” is only slightly less absurd than saying “a Catalan chemistry” or a “Catalan mathematics”. I believe that Catalans, to the extent that they do philosophy, must do so as it is (or should be) done everywhere by everyone: without too much concern for whether it does or does not express the national spirit. If national spirit is problematic, create philosophy of a national spirit is anenormously fuzzy thing. If it does not appear to be so at times, this is because philosophy has been mistaken for some hazy form of ideology. From the time that we begin to take philosophy seriously, we realize that adjectives are a hindrance, save for those adjectives that can clarify the conceptual structure of the philosophy being done. The impertinence of extra-philosophical adjectives reveals itself as soon as we specify a class of philosophical problems to tackle. Take problems that are epistemological in nature. Do we speak of a Catalan theory of knowledge? What would be involved in a Catalan philosophy of linguistics or of physics? A number of authors think that a universally quantified proposition does not imply the existence of what is denoted by the variable. Others hold that a particularly quantified proposition can be inferred from a universally quantified proposition so that the variable linked to the former proposition will be referential. Is there a Catalan theory of quantification? Or a Catalan theory for the reference of linked variables? You will say that extra-philosophical adjectives are superfluous when rather abstract problems of the kind mentioned here are posed, but that they are much more appropriate when we pose questions that seem less abstract –for example, questions about the human being, human society, human history. In these latter cases, I do not believe that the philosophy is specifically Catalan, English or Finnish. There is no “physical reality – mental reality” problem that is typically Catalan. There are no Catalan concepts of justice or equality. Catalan society, like Catalan history and the Catalan language, may be an important piece of empirical data for an ethics or for a political and social philosophy; I highly doubt, though, that this will lead us to establish the existence or the possibility of the existence of a Catalan ethics or a Catalan philosophy and political science.

Once we have stripped philosophy or science of spurious adjectives, we can acknowledge that ways of living, acting and thinking are forged in a human community, particularly in a national community, and that these give rise to certain preferences. In the culture of philosophy and science, preferences are expressed in a variety of ways: sometimes, it is the particularly intense cultivation of certain disciplines; sometimes it is a tendency to adopt given procedures or methods;

sometimes it is the most typical way of formulating judgments, which may be dogmatic, sceptical, measured or something else. Earlier, I expressed little enthusiasm for the existence of a “national spirit”, perhaps because I have scant sympathy for spirits of any kind. Therefore, the ways of living, acting and thinking to which I allude are not, as I understand them, manifestations of any hypothetical collective spirit; they are simply ways of living, acting and thinking that appear better suited than others to the historical conditions –the social, political and economic conditions– in which a community develops. Evidently, as soon as they become rather permanently established in the form of a tradition, these ways of living, acting and thinking have an influence, in turn, on their historical conditions. However, this is precisely the opposite of a national and collective spirit autocratically pressing down on the individuals in the community.

[...] *Cum grano salis* –a tiny grain of salt, which gives only a slight aftertaste to food without altering its composition– we can assent to the idea that certain communities with their own sufficiently developed cultural traditions appear to prefer certain methods to others. In the case of philosophy, which is much less unified than science and probably much less able to be unified as well, the peculiarity of the methods and procedures are quite striking. It is also revealing because the methods and procedures used are more directly bound up with the directions followed in the course of research. In this sense, we can talk of a “Catalan philosophy”, although we need to add hastily that this expression is no more than a convenient shorthand for identifying ways of approaching philosophy that have generally prospered in Catalonia and in Catalan-speaking lands.

Ways of approaching philosophy can become apparent in the form of tendencies or attitudes. [...] We now turn to a consideration of tendencies and attitudes in philosophy in Catalonia and in Catalan-speaking lands and introduce them under the general form of “traits”. Understood correctly, this is not a question of traits common to allthinkers, but rather a collection of various characterizations that have what Wittgenstein called “an air of family”. This does not mean that each and every thinker in a given cultural community has each and every one of these traits. But it does mean that there are traits that enable us to move from one to another without finding ourselves, in a manner of speaking, “outside the case”. Obviously, there are no common traits or at least no common philosophical tendency among Ramon Llull, Balmes, Llorens i Barba, Ramon Turró and Joaquim Xirau [...] A quick glance at the works of these thinkers shows that they are very different from one another and not only because they come from different periods in time, but also because of their temperaments. Nonetheless, the family resemblance appears undeniable.

For example, we do not find in Balmes or in Llorens i Barba the passionate mysticism of Ramon Llull, but we do find a similar confidence in the ordering power of human reason. We do not find in Ramon Llull the moderate scepticism

of Balmes or Llorens i Barba, but we do find a strong inclination to give order to mental acts and faculties. The spiritualism of Balmes and of Llorens i Barba looks nothing like the naturalism of Ramon Turró, but all three share a well-known confidence in the cognitive possibilities of experience. Joaquim Xirau would have found little use for the positivism of Turró, but the pair would agree on the necessity of avoiding speculative fantasies of the kind to which subjective idealism was fondly given.

In this suggested “family” order, perhaps more significant than the grouping of tendencies is the grouping of attitudes. We consider these to be elements of a kind of a system within which they can be combined in various ways and in various proportions.

What “elements” am I speaking of? I see four that appear important to me: faithfulness to reality; a penchant for contracts, or “pactism”, which does not reject compromise unless it involves sacrificing a value held to be essential; professionalism; and a desire for clarity. This fourfold structure may recall the four “Catalan ways of life”, of which I spoke many years ago. In effect, there are analogies between some of the mentioned elements and the “ways” to which I referred. [...] I will limit myself to saying a few words regarding two of the elements introduced fairly surreptitiously: faithfulness to reality and a desire for clarity.

Faithfulness to reality can be expressed in a very straightforward manner: being faithful to reality means, first of all, keeping your feet on the ground. It means treading carefully. To this end, one must be, I concede, slightly distrustful and even a little bit standoffish. Not a sceptic – which would be dogmatic from head to toe – but rather the opposite of reckless. [...]

The desire for clarity can be expressed in a very straightforward manner as well: being clear means, first of all, calling things by their name. It means not beating around the bush, not uttering circumlocutions of the kind beloved by obscurantists of all stripes. Obviously, it would be absurd to state that “clear” and “Catalan” are the same thing. But it is curious that the common saying “clar i català” is used to indicate clarity.

Translation from Catalan by Barnaby Noone